

Nor were President Truman or his Secretary of State James Byrnes in a rush to end the war before the new weapons could be demonstrated. They rejected almost unanimous recommendations from their officials to offer acceptable surrender terms to the Japanese before or during the Potsdam Conference in July. It was believed by these subordinates, and intelligence analysts and some diplomats, that such terms *might* lead to an immediate surrender. That would mean that the war would be over before the atomic bombs could be ready; though none of these officials proposed explicitly that the purpose of the proposed offer—or the also-recommended revelation to the Japanese that the Soviets were about to enter the war, which might have the same effect—was to avoid use of the Bomb.^{vi}

No military or civilian official proposed to the president before August 6 that the atomic bombs should not be used under any circumstances, even if the Japanese refused all acceptable terms and even if (as seemed unlikely to most, but not to General Marshall) the only alternative was an invasion of Japan. Many scientists in the Manhattan Project, in particular in Chicago, did argue against any use against Japan, even if it would save American military lives, on the grounds that such use would make a postwar nuclear arms race inescapable. But their petition never reached the president, or even Stimson prior to Hiroshima, and no official outside the Project made any such argument.

In ignorance of the scientists' argument that actually using the Bomb would make the future more dangerous^{vii}, there simply existed no moral or practical argument at the level of presidential discussion *against* using the Bomb when it became available. The

*Moral arguments
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and advisers*

US had participated in producing a firestorm in Hamburg in 1943 and in Dresden in 1945 (in both cases the initial fires were lit at night by the British but American bombers joined in the morning) and had been burning the cities of Japan, sixty-seven of them, since March in 1945. The moral and legal threshold of deliberate targeting of civilians had been crossed by the Allied high command much earlier. Indeed, that practice, earlier generally regarded as a murderous crime, had become the *main* focus of aerial bombardment for the British in February, 1942 and for the Americans in March, 1945.

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By June and July of 1945, when decisions of *how* to use the Bomb were being addressed, there was really no discussion whatever of *whether* ^{or not} to use it. There was a ten-minute discussion at one policy lunch of whether to precede its use on a city by a demonstration elsewhere, a notion quickly dismissed.^{viii} There was, very simply, no argument to be made against burning a city more efficiently—with one bomber and one plane—and more thoroughly and reliably than they were otherwise doing night after night with three hundred or more bombers at a time. Switching from tens of thousands of incendiaries in a night to a single “gadget” (as the Bomb was called in Los Alamos prior to the Trinity test) *did not raise any moral issue for anyone involved*. It posed nothing new to be considered, no moral issue different from the question of whether to continue the firebombing one more night. The latter “question” was not, so as we know, perceived as such or raised in either moral or practical terms by anyone either inside or outside the Air Force from March 9 to August 15. (The last thousand-plane raid was

*Stunning
How can that
be explained?*

conducted August 14, *after* both atomic bombs and after, indeed, the Japanese had decided to surrender, in order for the Air Force to end its campaign with a bang.)

If we were right to have initiated the firebombing five months earlier, or more to the point, if it made sense to continue it another week or a night, then—with respect to its effects either on Japanese citizens, on diplomacy or on the war—there was no reason at all not to supplement it with the new device. Moreover, there was no reason to pause between the first and second use of it for negotiations, any more than that course had been pursued after the Tokyo bombing or any of the subsequent firebombings. After all, the actual bomb damage, the scientists knew, would not be greater or more dramatic than had been achieved in Tokyo (it was somewhat less). The Japanese were much closer to surrender in July than they had been in March—the policymakers knew this from intercepts—but the only difference the Bombs would make in their calculations was the realization that a “Tokyo” firestorm could now be produced day after day, rather than as a one-shot level of destruction, and for that it would have to be demonstrated that the US had a number of Bombs. (Indeed, on August 6 some of the Japanese militarists in the war cabinet conjectured that the Americans had only one or two of these devices, which would not make a tangible difference in the war).

The audience for which the Bomb was bound to represent a dramatic innovation in the war was the American public, which had clung to what they had been told for four years, that Americans targeted only strictly military or industrial objectives and tried to minimize the inevitable, unsought destruction of civilians. That myth was about to be dispelled. President Truman did his best to keep it going a little longer, by announcing

on August 9 (as on August 6) that “the world will note that the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, a military base” (Sherry, 350); it took a few days, but only that, for Americans to notice that Hiroshima was a *city*. As was Nagasaki. It was a little late in the war for Americans to discover the willingness of their leaders to target city-dwellers directly for annihilation, but any doubts in the public about the morality of this were generally submerged by the joy of victory only a week later. Seemingly, this act of terrorism had had the magical effect in promptly ending a war and saving lives that the promoters of victory through airpower had envisioned ever since 1918, visions that the massive use of high explosives and firebombing of civilians—unacknowledged to the British and American publics--had failed to satisfy since 1941.

Still, it was in this constituency, only—the public, not officials before or after the use—that questions arose, and have persisted, about the moral appropriateness of dropping the bomb without warning, or without a demonstration, or about using it a second time so quickly, without allowing more time for the Japanese to surrender. Likewise, analysts and critics of the “decisions” surrounding use of the bomb have debated ever since, for over sixty years now, whether efforts could or should have been made to avert the “necessity” of using it by offering surrender terms, by announcing the prospect of Soviet entry, by warning of the Bomb (perhaps with a demonstration), by delaying its use till after Soviet entry on August 8 (perhaps combined with surrender terms); or whether it was necessary at all to use to avert an invasion, given the likelihood of Japanese collapse or surrender before invasion of the main islands, due to the blockade, conventional bombing, and Soviet entry before that.

But the relevance of all of this reflects a premise that it was important *not* to use the Bomb on a city *unless it were* “necessary,” in the light of some preeminent objective such as averting invasion, or achieving unconditional surrender, or radically shortening the war and saving American lives. That was not the perspective of any of the decision-makers close to the president, civilian or military. Such a premise in turn reflected the axiom that it was horrible, tabu, abhorrent, illegal, murderous, evil and sinful deliberately to intend and carry out the killing of masses of non-combatants, civilians, women and babies: something that could be justified, if at all, ever, only by transcendent “necessity,” by the unequivocal need, which could be met no other way, to avert the otherwise imminent certainty of a much greater evil. That was still the moral premise shared by many Americans that late in the war (and since), and they had been encouraged by their leaders to believe that these officials shared it. But that had not been true for years. Their leaders had secretly crossed the bridge to a different moral universe long before, in which burning enemy families in their bedrooms with magnesium bombs and napalm was as acceptable a wartime tactic as turning a flame-thrower on a Japanese soldier in a dugout. (In the same issue of Time magazine that reported the burning of Tokyo “like autumn leaves,” an article on the extensive use of flamethrowers in the Pacific islands had the headline, “Rodent Exterminators.”)

For these decision-makers, the question that has obsessed so many for the last half-century, whether the Bomb was “necessary,” was beside the point. It didn’t even arise before the event. It didn’t *have* to be “necessary.”^{ix} There were a number of ways

that the attacks *might be useful*—various people saw different ones or weighed them differently—and in the context of the bureaucratically-unquestioned firebombing campaign, there was no reason *not* to use both of the Bombs that would be available in early August.

Notes:

[no moral issue, really. “all those kids” ; denial: Stimson to Arnold (see HAK and N); ease of convincing both officials and public. Archbishop of Canterbury.

Real issue: effects on future of American cities, urban civilization; humanity. But a wash on whether actual use would be good or bad for this; or whether nuc power on balance would be good or bad. It was existence of bomb, not whether it was used or not, that posed ultimate dangers for America along with humanity, as Truman and Stimson saw it. There should have been a discussion of the arms race issues—as Franck wanted—but there wasn’t; no one at high levels raised it.

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There was no moral reason not to use the Bomb—in the unquestioned (from beginning to end) context of the firebombing. The only argument not to use it was the one that Franck/Szilard/Chicago petition made: the nuclear arms race consideration. **That was never raised at the Truman or Cabinet level** (except by Szilard to Byrnes, who rejected it). (If it had been, it would have been countered and probably neutralized by the belief of the scientists senior to the Chicago group, Conant and Oppenheimer, that achieving international control **required** the demonstration to the world of the Bomb’s destructiveness, on a city. Conceivably, FDR would have given greater attention to the Szilard argument than Truman did, if FDR had lived and if Szilard had gotten to him. Or not.) Thus, there was no reason presented to Truman, at all, not to use the Bomb: the only question was how and when to use it, and whether it should be preceded by a

demonstration (which was rejected after ten minutes of discussion at the informal lunch of the Interim Committee) or by an offer of terms to the Japanese (but Truman and Byrnes preferred to make this **after** using the Bomb, probably for two reasons: 1) they wanted to use the Bomb, for several reasons (though not because it was needed to avert an invasion, as they said later); 2) they preferred to mask their abandonment of strict unconditional surrender by the drama of the prior use of the Bomb (just as Nixon wanted to bomb Hanoi just before reentering negotiations in which he would be make major concessions in 1973; the resulting deal would look as if he had bombed his way into it, by brutality, not as if it resulted from weakening the US position).

The only public relations problem that the Bomb might present was that it unmasked the covert program of targeting cities full of civilians. And this they could expect to defuse (they didn't seem very worried about it) by the almost-immediate ending of the war, which would dominate attention (and even seem to legitimate the targeting even if, in the worst case, it was perceived as an act of terrorism). They knew the war would very probably (not certainly) end shortly, because they knew the Soviet entry was coming and they knew they were prepared, as soon as they had used the Bomb, to offer terms to the Emperor.

(If, on the other hand, the Emperor had been overthrown in a successful coup by the Army, as was attempted, then the war would not have ended despite all these events. Perhaps ten or more Bombs **plus** invasion would have ensued. Would the public have objected during this bombardment, now that there was no longer any pretense that cities were not being targeted per se? Probably not, under these conditions of Japanese militaristic intransigence: and the general willingness of most of the public (according to

Spaatz, which Sherry confirms, to see all the Japanese killed. Thus, the fact that the A-bomb meant “indiscriminate killing of civilians” would not go unnoticed—it didn’t—and there would have been some vocal opposition—there was—but that probably would not have led to overwhelming pressure to stop it, even if surrender didn’t follow immediately. (There wouldn’t have been much or any visual data on the destruction in Japan, while the war continued).

The underlying point: humans don’t care that much, don’t have that much reluctance to see (their leaders and nations cause) the suffering of others. (not only death, but cruelty, pain; living with bad burn wounds is not different from living with radiation disease...) Was it good for American leaders to be given a nuclear hammer? “Thank God we got it, not them.” Indeed, it could have been worse; or better! (If Germans had gotten one or two...) Worst result: winning a war with it, that supposedly would have gone on with enormous casualties (bad: public ignorance, then and later, that war was about to end! Kept secret from them at the time, and later: really, indefinitely.) on the other hand, better that people were led to believe that it needed to be justified, and was justified, in the eyes of American leaders, by avoiding a much greater evil. We were not indoctrinated into the moral universe of our leaders! LeMay can still look “evil.” Quote LeMay to Kantor.

Needs
more
application

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What underlies my observations here is my inference from all this experience, and more: Humans do not care *very much* about the suffering or mass deaths of “others”: foreigners, in particular “enemies,” even members of their own larger community who are not part of a narrower “us,” their family, ethnic group, or class. It may, or may not, be true in given circumstances that they don’t care at all. But at most, in most circumstances, unless their attention and concern is explicitly raised and focused by their leaders or their peers, they don’t care enough to devote any significant effort, creativity, sacrifice (even in the shallowest sense), to alleviating or avoiding that suffering of others, above all as measured by their willingness to risk their own social relationships, their jobs or future, their ability to meet responsibilities to their families (or their own careers).

In a sense this may seem obvious, “inevitable,” “only human,” even necessary to maintaining people’s stability and primary social relationships and responsibilities: “what everyone knows,” “the way it has to be.” But I am saying that the more extreme form of this proposition is true much more often and more consequentially than we often recognize in ourselves or other humans. Measured by the tests above, humans very often *do not care at all* about “others”’ suffering or deaths—even on the most massive scale or hideous forms--not in any practical sense with practical consequences. They may prefer not to hear or read about it; or conversely, they may prefer to hear or read about it, even see some pictures (not too many, or too gruesome), as a form of Grand Guignol entertainment, or a sense of reassurance of their own good fortune, that this is happening to other people, not to themselves, or a confirmation of how bad some other people are,

the perpetrators of this misery. This is particularly true when the suffering or harm cannot be attributed in any way to one's own leaders or community or one's own failures to meet obligations. And—an important corollary to what I am arguing—humans *are very easily and readily reassured as to this lack of their personal or group responsibility*. Assertions on this point by their leaders or opinion-makers will not be challenged or probed; they need provide very little in the way of evidence or substantial argument.

The city-bombing programs provide noteworthy examples of this. On the one hand, it seemed important to maintain home-front morale—or in practical terms, unquestioning and enthusiastic support of a leadership that was presumed to act not only in the best interests of the citizens but on the basis of the same values they shared, in contrast to the values of the enemy—to assure the British and American publics that the operations of their air forces were in marked contrast to those of the Nazis conduct in Rotterdam, Coventry and the London Blitz. In reality, from early 1942 on for the British and increasingly for the Americans, the operations were identical to the Nazi terror bombing, deliberately so, and on a very much larger scale. (“Bomber” Harris, head of Bomber Command in the RAF, actually drew operational inspiration from the demolition of Coventry, which for both publics defined Nazi savagery). In Hamburg, Cologne, Dusseldorf and countless German cities, long before Dresden, Tokyo and Kobe, the high commands were directing their aircrews to carry out the moral and practical equivalent of throwing whole families of civilians, of all ages and infirmities, into flaming ovens.

What is striking is the ease and success with which this vast reality, known to tens of thousands of airmen and air staff (and tens of millions of Germans) was concealed from the British and American publics, merely by the occasional assertions of commanders that it wasn't happening. From beginning to end of the war, civilian and military officials reiterated that the policies of the British and American air forces were exclusively precision bombing of military objectives, like ports, bases, transport, and war-supporting factories, and that civilian casualties, though regrettably inevitable, were unsought, inadvertent, and to the maximum operational extent avoided and minimized. This was flatly false, as any but the most cursory investigation by legislatures or even journalists could easily have discovered. But there was no such investigation, even rudimentary, in either nation : nor demand for any, in the publics or institutions of civil society. A few religious leaders raised the issue both in Britain and America (and some pacifists, like Vera Brittain in England)—partly reflecting reports from co-religionists in Germany—only to have their worries dismissed by their superiors, who in turn accepted unquestioningly false assurances from officials. [see Bishop of Chichester and Archbishop of Canterbury; Jesuit in US)

The public was misled; it was, one might say, to their credit that their leaders thought it worthwhile to mislead them in this matter; but it is also true that the citizens allowed themselves to be misled very easily.

The same may even be true of some of the leaders, though in their case the phenomenon of unrealism, denial, even self-deception is almost baffling. Based on some of the

recorded internal statements of high officials, there is a question as to how clearly the highest officials permitted themselves to be aware of what their commanders were doing. Henry Stimson was Secretary of War, with highest responsibility, under President Roosevelt, for the operations of the Army Air Force. From March through August of 1945 his air force was doing its best, with great though not total success, to annihilate the urban population of Japan. Michael Sherry reports (p. 294: I use this here to stand in for better accounts):

Sometime, probably early in the spring of 1945, he had extracted a “promise from [Assistant Secretary for Air Robert] Lovett that there would be only precision bombing in Japan.” Despite the March 10 and subsequent fire raids, he remained convinced as late as May 16, as he told Truman, that he was holding the air force, “so far as possible, to the ‘precision’ bombing [of Japan] which it has done so well in Europe.” It seemed important to do so because “the reputation of the United States for fair play and humanitarianism is the world’s biggest asset for peace in the coming decades.”

Is it really possible that the Secretary of War remained uninformed of what it was that the Twentieth Air Force under LeMay was doing (exclusively) from March 10 on? At some point during or after the war he did get the picture, since in his Harper’s article in 1947 *justifying the atom-bombing* he pointed out that “In March, 1945, our Air Force had launched the first great incendiary raid on the Tokyo area. In this raid more damage was done and more casualties were inflicted than was the case at Hiroshima.” Sherry, after citing this (295) goes on to say:

But there is no evidence that Stimson at the time appreciated the magnitude of the March 10 raid, unless it provided him the spur to approach Lovett—if so, he did not note it at the time. [my note: in his diary, which is the source of the above quotes, or reported in any other documentation or memoirs.] To the contrary, only the renewed fire raids on Tokyo at the end of May caught his attention and led him to query Arnold about “my promise from Lovett that there would be only precision bombing in Japan.” Stimson was disturbed by press reports indicating a ‘bombing of Tokyo which was very far from that.’ Arnold explained that Japan presented a “difficult situation” because industries were

scattered about in cities and were “closely connected in site with the houses of their employees,” but promised to limit “damage to civilians.” [Stimson diary, 1 June 1945]

Arnold’s explanation was, of course, misleading in implying that civilians were the victims only of unavoidable spillover from attacks on economic objectives. But more important, Stimson decline to question him critically. As in his response to Dresden, Stimson did not want to confront the brutality of American bombing; he merely wanted reassurance that it had been reduced to the minimum.”

But that “reassurance” was not merely misleading; it was false, sensationally so. The intent and the effect of the bombing campaign was, to the fullest operational extent, to *maximize* civilian deaths. Is it really possible that Stimson did not know this?

Unless this diary was intended for later publication and deceptive exculpation (which historians do not seem to believe), such an exchange, on its face, would seem evidence that the Secretary of War was being systematically deceived by his Assistant Secretary for Air and the Chief of Staff of the Air Force. But giving Stimson the fullest benefit of the doubt on this, the ease of the spectacular deception would indicate an intense need-not-to-know on his part, a collaboration in his own self-deception.

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It can be presumed that what Stimson did not know, or did not permit himself to know, was not known clearly to his bosses, President Roosevelt or, after May, President Truman. There is no record of any questions raised by either of them or any discussion of the firebombing program. (Sherry reports that Roosevelt “had been informed of the test fire raids, and then of the March 10 raid, but made no recorded inquiries,” citing the War Department Operational Summaries in the FDR Papers, p. 283). Truman’s first reaction on Hiroshima, to the men on the warship *Augusta*, was “This is the greatest thing

in history.” But on August 10, back in Washington, Secretary of Commerce Henry Wallace recorded in his diary a cabinet meeting after the second bombing:

Truman said he had given orders to stop atomic bombing. He said the thought of wiping out another 100,000 people was too horrible. He didn't like the idea of killing, as he said, “all those kids.”
[Sherry, 349]

But killing kids, and other people (mostly women and the old) in maximum numbers had been the work of the Air Force for five months then, and continued to be, with firebombs, for the remaining five days of the war. Though the last thousand-plane raid on August 12 [check] did not kill 100,000, it was not for want of trying. After Tokyo, it had taken attacks on two, three or four cities to reach an additional body count of 100,000. That took two to four days instead of one. But since the Air Force had the time and the planes, and sixty-nine cities to target, that toll was reached seven times over in the five months between Tokyo and Hiroshima.

One can focus on the incoherence and shallowness of the discussion about how the Bomb should be used (not, whether, which received no attention at all). Thus, the Interim Committee's conclusion that “we should not concentrate on a civilian area” while, as Sherry notes, at the same time the bomb should make as “profound psychological impression on as many of the inhabitants as possible.” (The latter consideration quickly ruled out a demonstration in an unpopulated area, which would affect only a few direct observers). Thus, the target should be “a vital war plant employing a large number of workers and closely surrounded by workers' houses.”

Sherry observes, "It was as if the workers could just watch, and any harm done to them would be incidental or inadvertent." (323).

Likewise, the Committee initially *avored* Kyoto as the first choice for the target. "Kyoto possessed from a 'psychological point of view' an advantage as 'the former capital of Japan' and 'an intellectual center for Japan,' for 'the people there are more apt to appreciate the significance of such a weapon as the gadget.' As the committee later put it, the people of Kyoto were 'more highly intelligent and hence better able to appreciate the significance of the weapon.' ...it was not clear how 'highly intelligent' people could appreciate if they were dead nor what difference it would make if they could." (Sherry 319).

Truman "told Stimson 'to use it so that military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target and not women and children. Even if the Japs are savages, ruthless, merciless and fanatic, we as the leader of the world for the common welfare cannot drop this terrible bomb on the old capital or the new.'" "Truman's diary did not record how he reasoned that avoiding Tokyo and Kyoto constituted sparing women and children. Presumably they lived in other cities as well, though after the war Truman wrote that he had asked Stimson 'which cities in Japan were devoted exclusively to war production,' as if there were such cities...'The target will be a purely military one,' he noted at the time." (Sherry 323)

Was this blather about meaningless or simply false distinctions and absurd allegations of “concern” simply a rehearsal of the lies that would be told the public and a deliberate sanitizing of the record, or did it reflect Truman’s genuine ignorance of what was going on, or a process of self-deception to avert any personal qualms? Probably all of these. Add in, helpful obfuscation of past and planned realities to allow the president not to know what he did not want to think about. (Much less likely, what it might seem to be on the surface: deliberate manipulation by his subordinates to conceal from him information that might really cause him to choose a different course). In all this, there is a clear, precise parallel to the exchanges between Stimson and Arnold on the firebombing.

As in all the discussion in Germany of the “final solution,” which dealt both in writing and in recorded conversation almost exclusively with “removal, deportation, transport East” of Jews and virtually never with their intended (and accomplished) extermination, discussion of firebombing, or “area bombing,” proceeded internally as well as in public in terms of “military and industrial” targets, “housing,” areas (“square miles”) “destroyed, or, where civilians were concerned, “homeless” or “dehoused,” or “psychological effects,” virtually never humans dead or injured. The exclusive reliance on euphemisms (or lies) presumably made it psychologically easier for the officials in their internal deliberations and decisions, and guarded against a possible negative reaction to the truth by their publics or international opinion. A question of some importance, rarely addressed and impossible to answer confidently, is whether this dissimulation was “necessary,” as well as prudent and convenient, either for the decision-

makers or the public. Certainly the air crews came to know what they were doing (though not the concrete reality on the ground), and it didn't slow them down or lead to mutiny. Likewise, at least some of the top commanders knew well what they were choosing to direct. Suppose the public had been told quite candidly, bluntly? Surely some would have protested, both in Britain and America. But would that not have been a minority? What effect would they have had, on the strategy and the war? Would it have been significant? To repeat: Was it "necessary" or merely "convenient" (to avert any controversy at all, whether or not it would have forced a change in policy)—in order to pursue their policies (including insistence on unconditional surrender)—to keep the public and subordinate officials in the dark?

A test of a parallel question has occurred in the last few years on the subject of other "tabus": torture, "extraordinary rendition" (a euphemism for kidnapping "suspects" and shipping them to countries where they would be held indefinitely and tortured) and massive warrantless wiretapping. In all these cases the administration took the effort to conceal the practices within "special access programs" higher than top secret, since they were clearly illegal and unconstitutional, and in the first two cases, widely regarded as deeply immoral. And that secrecy did prevent controversy, or any discussion at all, for several years. Yet when each of these ultimately was leaked to the public, though controversy did ensue, it had no significant effect on the programs, which not only continued (with no accountability, as yet, for the criminality among any of the civilian or military officials conducting the programs, and no probing investigation by Congress) but eventually with a veneer, at least, of legalization by Congress (despite constitutional

issues). So, was the earlier secrecy from the public really “necessary”? (It’s conceivable that revelation of the wiretapping, which was not only illegal but contrary to specific denials by President Bush, just before the 2004 election—when the New York Times first learned of it—might have affected enough voters to swing that narrow election. But the torture was revealed well before that election, and despite much initial publicity, did not even figure in the presidential debates or, so far as one could tell, in the outcome.)

By the same token, I question whether it was necessary, as distinct from politically prudent and convenient, for the Air Corps spokesmen to lie so consistently to the public about the intended targets of their annihilation campaign in Japan. Indeed, they were caught in something of a conflict between wanting to boast of their achievement in destroying so many square miles of Japanese cities and wanting to downplay the effects of this on the human bodies caught in the fires. The news stories the day after the March 10 Tokyo bombing, reflecting Air Corps reports, led to “speculation...on shift from selected military targets to area bombing.” The next day the public relations officer on Guam was cabled that “commentators [were] having [a] field day searching implications...which imply this is area bombing and speculating whether this means departure from policy of precision bombing.” He was instructed to counteract ‘editorial comment...about blanket incendiary attacks upon cities...Guard against anyone stating this is area bombing.’

In a press conference two weeks later, Deputy Chief of Staff Lauris Norstad “faced a familiar dilemma; wanting on the one hand to exploit LeMay’s blitz for all the prestige and publicity it was worth, on the the other to head off the growth of a barbaric

image for the air force.” Asked off the record for “any idea how many civilians might have been affected,” he would only repeat a figure on “factory workers” “made homeless”: “1,200,000.” (A good estimate, which he omitted, of civilians affected by losing their lives as well as their homes would have been one-tenth of that.) Question: “Was there any change in ‘the basic policy of the Air Forces in pin-point bombing [and] precision?’” Answer: “None.” (Sherry, 289)

I am suggesting that lies like this did not represent a vast gap in sensibility between the officials and the mass of the populace, but simply some perceived gap between official attitudes and those of *part* of the public, a minority but enough to make a small effort (lying and secrecy are low-cost efforts within the bureaucracy) to avoid any controversy at all worthwhile. The same policy could be regarded as a favor to a much larger part of the population who would simply prefer ignorance, who would be more comfortable not knowing more realistically about their leadership and what they were doing. Whereas, according to General Ira Eaker, Chief of Staff Arnold had “feared the public reaction of the U.S. public to urban area bombing of women and children [in Germany, because of] the large percentage of German people in this country and those who felt we should not have become involved in a war with Germany at all,” in contrast “Ninety percent of Americans would have killed every Japanese.” General Spaatz, Comander of Strategic Bombing Forces in the Far East recalled, “We didn’t hear any complaints from the American people about mass bombing in Japan; as a matter of fact, I think they felt the more we did the better.” (Sherry, 249) And although there was clearly a racist dimension to this difference—along with desires for revenge for Pearl Harbor and

the Bataan Death March—there had been, in fact, no particular outcry or political pressure about the area bombing in Germany either, despite Arnold's fears. When one dispatch after Dresden asserted, as if it were an official release, that the policy of terror bombing of civilian areas had now been adopted, there was consternation in the high command about the possible public reaction. But the officials simply denied the story, and the denial was accepted by the public without any controversy. There is a lack of evidence suggesting that the public reaction would have all that different or consequential if they had not denied it, if they had simply announced truthfully what they were doing. The difference in the public between “not caring to know”—not caring to look behind official assertions—and not caring at all, is difficult to discern. (The *words* “terror” and “torture” have a bad ring to them: so officials even in totalitarian societies like Nazi Germany simply eschew them, which is no great effort.)

[what does the distinction between necessary and convenient matter? I have been inclined for many years to define the problem facing humanity in terms of a gap between the values of American leaders and the public, with respect to threats and practice of annihilation of civilians. Certainly there were moments when policy shifted, secretly. The public did not know this, they were kept from knowing it by secrecy and lies. But would publicity, at the time or later (it has never occurred fully) have really made much difference? I am now inclined more to focus on the ordinariness of the leaders themselves. If American officials would do this, others would (though not all are so corrupted by the belief in the efficacy, past and prospective, of airpower). But it is also true that the American public has been very accepting of this, to the extent they do become aware of it; and if they would, who would not? (subject to the above qualification). Thus, a human problem.

A point I haven't yet made clear enough: The fact that Truman and other officials did not see Hiroshima as a moral decision did not (contrary to Kuznick) represent moral blindness, unusual obtuseness, on their part. Given unquestioned acceptance of the firebombing campaign—and it was unquestioned in May-July 1945 (it was simply going on; most officials had “inherited” it, starting with Truman; and to question it, or to propose stopping it, on moral or legal grounds, would have raised questions of very widespread culpability, for what that mattered, and barbarity, which Truman and Stimson claimed to be concerned about, like Kissinger to Nixon in May, 1973)—then quite “objectively,” there really was no moral issue in introducing the more efficient means of creating a firestorm, the atom bomb. Questions of controlling it in the future, when thought of at all by Stimson, were seen as postwar questions. (If Stimson really did

suggest to Truman in his first briefing in May, 1945, that he might even consider not using it at all in the war—as Margaret Truman recalled—then that was the *sole* mention of this possibility by any official close to Truman, ever.)

Kuznick sees, wants to see, Truman as peculiarly deficient and culpable, and thus his accession to power as historically very fateful. (Compared to Wallace; but given the attitude of the party bosses, how close did Wallace really come to being VP, despite the attitudes of most of the party members? Well, who knows: really, as close as the possible failure to cut the mike at the convention?) But would international control of nuclear energy have been achieved, if the bomb had not been used? (It would have been preferable to find out!) or might Conant and Oppenheimer and perhaps Stimson have been right, that without use there would not have been enough urgency (which was not enough anyway)?

Yes, if the

LeMay quote

Stimson to Truman quote

Sallagar on Feb. 42

Motives for switch to area bombing (but to back to 1923, 1932 Mitchell...)

Two theories of winning by bombing.

Thursday, January 3, 2008

(this could go earlier, in various places)

I must repeat the planned, officially calculated estimate of the results if the president—or possibly a subordinate—issued an “execute” order for the current operational war plan in 1961. Half a billion dead, or more. Five or six hundred million victims: a hundred Holocausts. I learned that in the White House in the spring of 1961, the same week that President Kennedy did. It was on a single-page chart, Top Secret—Eyes Only for the President—submitted to the president by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in answer to a question I had drafted. I doubt that piece of paper, or the estimate on it, was known to more than a handful of people in the White House and the Joint Staff officers who calculated it. I have rarely met anyone who could imagine that answer before I told them; the usual guesses under-estimate by several hundred million or more.

The correct figure—sometimes represented by the estimate for deaths in the Sino-Soviet Bloc alone, 325 million—occasionally now appears in a few academic studies, from one source or another (perhaps often, indirectly, from me). But I have very rarely been made aware of any implications being drawn from it, or of lives or behavior being affected by it. Perhaps hearers simply don’t believe me. Or it is too unfamiliar, too far outside their usual frames of reference (even for antiwar activists) for them to do the work of integrating it into their thinking and their political lives. (I included the story of my learning this figure in my memoir *Secrets*, pp. 57-60. It didn’t fit in easily to the storyline of that account, limited by space, which dealt mainly with my association with

Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers, but I couldn't bear to publish a book for a mass audience that failed to bring it to their attention. No review mentioned that passage, nor did any reader ever comment on it to me, except for my fourteen-year-old grandson ("Grand-dad, that was incredible!")

I think it is hard for people to grasp from a brief account what I had learned from several years of esoteric experience with nuclear war plans and operations. First, this was the best official estimate of the consequences of the highest-level *operational* plan—not a "contingency" plan for some remote possibility, drafted by a low-level staffer—kept continuously up to date for instant execution by crews and vehicles continuously on alert in silos, bases and submarines all over the world, trained and indoctrinated to carry out meticulously-planned mission sorties that would kill some four hundred million humans in the Soviet Union, China and Eastern Europe. (The other two hundred million deaths in the estimate would be inadvertent, though inescapable, depending on the season and its winds: in Western Europe and neutral countries adjacent to the Soviet Bloc, such as Finland, Afghanistan, Japan).

Second, this was an operational plan for a US *first strike*. Not a preventive war, out of the blue, but not a retaliation for a Soviet nuclear attack that had destroyed US forces or targets in US territory. It was envisioned to take place either as a deliberate US escalation of a limited, non-nuclear conflict, or else as preemption of an imminent Soviet attack on the US homeland that had not yet been launched, or at least, had not yet arrived. And the latter possibility was recognized as virtually impossible by Army and Navy intelligence at the time, given the infeasibility of a disarming attack by the almost-

negligible strategic forces of the Soviet Union; the Air Force disagreed, or pretended it did, but only until the fall of 1961.

END NOTES

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^{iv} In Rwanda in 1994, Hutu militia using only machetes and some bullets killed a few more unarmed in a little less time: about 900,000 in 100 days. The two slaughters fifty years apart, so close in scale and tempo, represent the extreme ends of the range of human technology for killing, from the Bronze age to the end of World War II. The hearts and minds that set the technology in motion do not show comparable progress, or any.

^v (No negotiations were going on during this time, though US officials knew, both through intercepts and from the Soviets, that the Japanese were hoping that the Soviets would intercede for them in a negotiated settlement; with our approval, the Soviets were temporizing with the Japanese envoys, while concealing their intention to enter the war on August 8.)

^{vi} Not all of these officials were aware of the existence of the Bomb project. Those who were, and who recommended the offer of terms to the Japanese (principally, that the Emperor would be allowed to remain, and would not be tried), may or may not have desired to avoid use of the Bomb. If that was a motive, none expressed it, in any way that has been preserved. But they were at least willing to see the war end without the Bomb having been dropped. And they were willing to be seen to depart from the formula of unconditional surrender.

As of the time of the Potsdam Conference in July, Truman and Byrnes did not accept the latter departure; and they may well, as Gar Alperovitz has argued, have differed from the former as well. (In the end, Truman and Byrnes did soften the demand of unconditional surrender, obliquely but effectively, but only after the two Bombs had been used.)

^{vii} This was contradicted in the minds of some other scientists, including Conant and Oppenheimer, by the thought that only demonstration of the Bomb's destructive power against a city would frighten the world into curtailing national sovereignty in order to control it internationally.

^{viii} This was raised by some of the Manhattan Project scientists. Why did they do so, and no one else? Perhaps they were less aware of the firebombing that was already going on. They may have been among those who, knowing of the ultimate implications of using it on a city for a nuclear arms race, wanted if possible to avoid having to use it; but then, why not raise more forcefully the importance of not using it at all? (I don't believe this was ever raised at the Policy Group level; the petition to this effect did not reach Stimson before Hiroshima.)

^{ix} "Neither the navy's admirals nor the air force's generals particularly thought the bomb was necessary—tried and true methods soon would win anyway—but by the same token they were not especially opposed to the bomb's employment, as long as invasion was avoided." (Sherry, *The Rise of American Airpower: The Creation of Armageddon*, 326).